

SCRIPTURE JOURNAL DISCUSSIONS

Ecclesiastes Discussion #2

INTRODUCTION

LAST WEEK — We began our discussion of Ecclesiastes with a brief refresher on how we should read and study the Bible. Because we believe the Bible is God’s word to man, we anticipate that He has some lifechanging things to say to us. We can’t wait to get to the APPLICATION of a verse or a Chapter. But before we rush to application, we need to understand something about the author and his readers.

FIRST — Observation: What do we know about

the author — the historical context (time in which he was writing)

his readers — cultural context

SECOND — Interpretation:

linguistic meaning of the text within its context

THEN — Application

I prefaced by saying that we can only correctly interpret the book of Ecclesiastes by understanding where the author (Solomon) was — or better yet, where he was not — in his relationship with the Lord. He describes the world that all of us see, all of us live in, all of us experience. But he looked at it as a man who thinks and lives as if God doesn’t matter. He processed what he saw and experienced with **no regard** for the eternal and **no thought** of ultimate accountability to God.

There is a key phrase that sums up that worldview — *UNDER THE SUN*. And that worldview shaped the **advice** he gives **and** the overarching tone of **despair** and **helplessness** in the book. He came to hopeless conclusions **because** he was processing life from the ground level. Looking at the world from the perspective that *“God does not matter — life is temporal — and there will be no answering to*

God” Solomon kept coming to the same conclusion: *Vanity of vanities — ALL is vanity.*

After last week — my wife Valerie had a brilliant suggestion: “*You should have Delia Ursulescu be a part of these Scripture Journal Discussions.*” I thought: “That’s a no brainer!” Delia has a Master’s Degree in Global Apologetics and she is currently working on a Ph.D. in Theology and Apologetics.

CONVERSATION KEY

PASTOR RICHARD

DELIA

PASTOR JOHN

HOW IS THAT GOING?

YOU SHARED WITH ME THAT AS A TEENAGER you said pretty much the same words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes — *that all is vanity* and *that life under the sun is meaningless.* TELL US ABOUT THAT.

DELIA — I vividly remember saying something similar to Eccl 2:17 “I hate life because what is done under the sun is grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.” I considered suicide, at an intellectual level—I never really tried anything to take my life—but I thought to myself: if life is this pointless, why try to stay alive?

I think this is the point of Ecclesiastes: the preacher is telling us that if we take God out of the equation, all we are left with is what’s “under the sun” as you pointed out last week.

I am thankful that God has given me answers to these questions I’ve asked, not full answers, but adequate and satisfying answers. After months of discouragement, even depression, thinking I don’t want to live this life, God met me in a sweet way. My questions flowed out of the issue of evil and suffering: “why would a Good God allow his children to suffer so much?” I grew up in a communist country where I heard numerous stories of Christians imprisoned and

persecuted; stories of people not having enough food. My mom's mother died when she was a kid.

Every tragedy or hardship I heard about made it harder to believe a good God could possibly exist.

Yet, one night as my sisters and I were visiting a friend, this friend shared her story of how God spoke to her in the hard season she found herself in. Her story of God's provision captured my attention and my heart. "Well, if this God exists, I do want him in my life." So, later that night, by myself, I knelt down in a different room and I told God those exact words ("I guess if you are this type of God, I want you to be my God). His joy filled me and I knew in that moment he was real.

My questions didn't stop though. While I believed in God, I still struggled and wrestled with the hard questions that atheists and agnostics bring. The beautiful result is that my understanding of God has deepened and I love him more as I understand more and more of him.

This is why I love a book like Eccl. It forces me to stop and ask some of the hard questions. And if I'm willing to stay there, not fight from the uncomfortable feelings that come up with the hard questions, then the result is truly a treasure for my soul.

YOU SHARED A COUPLE OF THINGS with me that are so relevant to reading and studying the Bible

FIRST: You made this super important observation:

When need to understand that when we read the Scriptures **we actually bring things** to the text) that can either skew our understanding of a passage OR enhance our understanding of a passage. (load the text with meaning based on our own story / experiences

CAN YOU UNPACK THAT FOR US? (I thought about you when Solomon said *Ecclesiastes 1:13* *And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.*)

DELIA — my natural interest in difficult questions. I find the process of finding answers to hard questions as fun as watching sports is for a sports fan.

- When I honestly grapple with hard questions (and bring them to God), they end up being a blessing - because they lead to a deeper understanding of God.
- But there's a danger: I can view everything from the perspective of a puzzle to be solved (even biblical truth)
 - Even though I know this about myself, I still fall into this trap often
- My application - Following in the footsteps of the teacher of Eccl, we have to identify the extremes into which we can fall and then be careful and ask God's help to avoid them (as I read the book last week, I had to ask myself this question a couple of times)
 - extremes: focusing on intellectual questions at the expense of living truth out VERSUS focusing on practical living while ignoring any hard questions

SECOND: You talked about *Asking hard questions* and about *doubts*

ASKING HARD QUESTIONS — You shared with me how Christianity can be seen as naive or cynical often because we haven't grappled with the hard questions of life, like Eccl. **TALK ABOUT THAT**

Is it possible I get to these seasons in my life where the "Christian answer" doesn't seem satisfying because I failed to ask the hard questions of myself, because I failed to let the Word of God bring to the surface the assumptions I've absorbed from my culture without even realizing it?

What do you think, for the average Christian, is the danger of not pressing God for answers ("grappling") when life and circumstances are not easily explained. Not just in the manner in which they can be perceived, but in regards to their own spiritual growth and experience of God.

You also brought up a really important question — *How can we reflect God as we deal with hard questions:*

He is so gracious **to us** when we grapple with emotional or intellectual questions. **Do we** reflect the same grace and love to those struggling with the hard questions that he shows us?

DEALING WITH DOUBT: I don't believe that legitimate doubt means the end of faith.

"There's a kind of doubt that actually wants answers, and there's a kind of doubt that doesn't want answers." ~ Keller

The Book of Ecclesiastes closes with the eternal in view — and with God as the ultimate reference point —

but I do believe that we are living in a time in which doubt is considered a virtue — a prerequisite for respect — and the person who holds strong convictions is suspected of being too simplistic and unsophisticated. **HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THAT?**

DELIA — doubt the doubt: *life is to be lived, not just questioned, so we have to be careful to place this question within a context. The postmodern influence on Western thought is the raising of doubt to the greatest virtue. That's not what I am suggesting.

Doubting Thomas: Jesus rebuked Thomas for his failure to believe the eyewitnesses who had seen him after His resurrection unlike John the Baptist who believed after Jesus sends word of his miracles.

Even as Christians, we can "doubt too far" (I've done it): we have to be careful not to think "doubting" is more virtuous if the evidence points in a different direction. And the evidence of Ecclesiastes is pretty overwhelmingly supports the point that a God who gives meaning must exist.

What does "doubting too far" look like for you...

when do you personally know that it has crossed the line and no longer is edifying to you or those around you?

How do you welcome both the believer and skeptic into the healthy and vulnerable process of working out “doubt”?

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR TAKE AWAYS from the statement in Ecclesiastes 1:9 *"There is nothing new under the sun"*

last week, I was studying for a paper and my topic was the nature of human beings (what motivates us, what tempts us, spiritual formation)

- as I was thinking of this phrase, it occurred to me that even the latest neuroscience applied to identity formation overlaps the principles taught in the Bible; hence, I found myself saying, "there is truly nothing new under the sun"
- Yet, it also occurred to me that **I (personally)** know very little about everything under the sun - so, it humbled me and encouraged me as I mentioned before
- the application: the importance of community as we seek to understand what God says about this life "under the sun"

CAN YOU SHARE how Ecclesiastes 2:1 spoke to you this time thought it in our Bible Bus readings?

Eccl 2:1 - "Test with pleasure"

- often when I read the Bible, God brings things to mind.
- this comparison of 1984 and The Brave New World has been the tool God has used a few times to challenge me whether I am absorbing the cultural preference for ease, comfort, or pleasure

You mentioned “cultural preference” when it comes to pleasure...which let’s me know you understand that there’s also a “God preference” ☺

How do you balance enjoying the pleasures God has given you as his daughter and, in a disciplined, earnest way, work against a pleasure seeking human nature/society and?

NEXT WEEK our discussion on Ecclesiastes is going to zero in on Ecclesiastes 3 —

a passage made famous in secular culture by the Bob Dylan tune “Turn, Turn, Turn. Dave Heitman, JD and Breylynn are going to our discussion

I'd like to close tonight's discussion by having you set the stage for next week with some of your thoughts on the first 8 verses of Ecclesiastes 3

The passage suggests that the preacher found the life futile because one must "fit" within the fixed order within God's pre-ordained plan for seasons

- this is always an interesting topic for me because, in my experience, I've seen Christians abuse the meaning of God's sovereignty (used out of context, it can lead to something ugly similar to how spanking taken out of the context of a loving parent-child relationship can become something ugly).
- - this topic makes me react viscerally at times because of the abuses I've been exposed to
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 - but if I am honest with myself, I am sure that I react so much to this topic because, like a good Westerner, I think I can control my life; to admit I am not in control is scary.
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 - Yes, if I remind myself that God, my loving, just, compassionate, faithful Father is in control, no fear remains. *But the fear of losing control is my natural tendency living in this body*, in this world. This latter reaction is more automatic sometimes than the reality of my identity in Christ
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- Time is NOT ours - the danger for me, during the week, is to become so productivity-focused that I forget about the people God puts in my life (after all, being wise with our use of time is a biblical principle, right?)
- - story about my last flight to Virginia: I was going to school, so that means tons of reading left and, this time, I had about 50ish pages left to write. As I sat on the plane from Denver to D.C., the lady sitting next to me started talking to me. Initially, I was cringing inside thinking I really needed to read. Yet, at the same time, I felt the nudge to engage her in communication. She asked me what studying

apologetics means because I had earlier mentioned that's my topic of study. Well, that opened the door for the gospel and I was able to share with her why I thought Jesus is the most satisfying answer to all of life's questions

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- And an amazing part of this story is that the following week, even though I slept only 3 hours per night for a few nights, I had one evening where I was able to finish in a few hours what otherwise might've taken me a lot of hours (maybe days). This doesn't always happen to me, but it is one example in which following the lead of the God in control of time and seasons allows us to redeem the time.
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- Ps. 31:15: You are my God. My times are in your hands